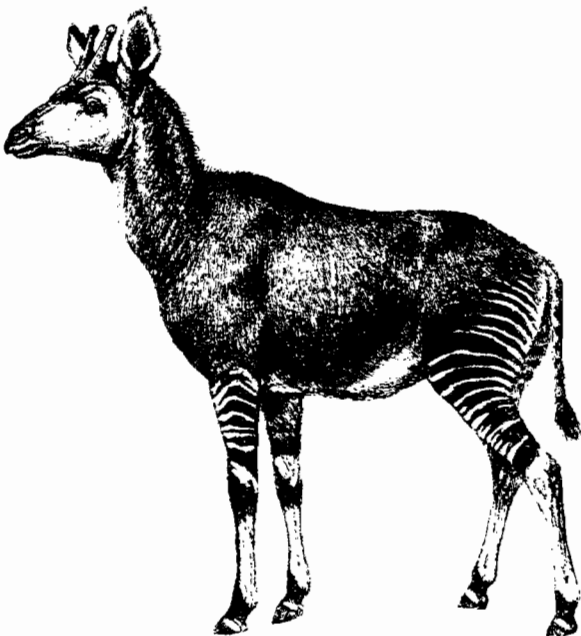




# RESPONSE

**Paul W. Taylor**



1. I would like to clarify at the outset what it means to make value judgments from a non-conscious organism's standpoint (or what it means to take that standpoint in making such judgments). The phrases "from X's standpoint" or "taking X's standpoint" can be eliminated entirely, if we wish. We would then simply talk about making judgments concerning what benefits X or harms X when using, as our standard for such judgments, the preservation and enhancement of X's existence and well-being. To make such judgments on the basis of that standard is to take the organism's standpoint. Doing this need not require imagining ourselves to be the organism, or empathetically identifying with it, or fancifully placing ourselves in its



## DISCUSSION

situation, or the like. Watson affirms that objective considerations, knowable in ordinary empirical ways, can provide evidence for the truth of judgments about what is good or bad for an organism without presupposing that it is conscious. So we both agree that it is possible to make correct judgments about these matters on objective grounds. However, I would want to emphasize that accurate, sustained, and biologically enlightened observations of an organism and its reactions to its environment enable us to make more reliable judgments of that sort — judgments that are more likely to be true than those made under less favorable epistemic conditions. I would also add that our understanding of an organism's nature and of why it does what it does is augmented and deepened as we become directly acquainted with it as a unique individual. There is nothing mysterious about this kind of acquaintanceship or familiarity. It occurs, for example, when a person takes daily care of a houseplant and sees to its healthy growth.

2. It is unfortunate that my term "moral subject" gave rise to the idea that I was assuming every entity that is a moral subject to be conscious. The traditional term "moral patient" means the same thing, but I avoided using it because it sounds odd to readers who ordinarily think of "patients" in health care contexts. But my definition of "moral subject" (quoted by Watson) makes clear that the presence of consciousness, or even simple sentience, is not implied.

3. Now for the central point. If we do regard a living thing (conscious or non-conscious) as having inherent worth (or "moral considerability", i.e., as being worthy of the moral consideration of all moral agents), then true judgments about what benefits it become components of reason-for-action propositions. Such propositions are of the form: The fact that a certain act will benefit an organism is a reason to do it, other things being equal. To generalize: For any action X, if X is instrumental to the preservation or well-being of an animal or plant, X ought to be done for that reason, other things being equal. Correspondingly, for any action Y that is destructive or detrimental to the existence and well-being of an animal or plant, that fact about Y

is a (*prima facie*) reason why it ought not be done. To respect nature is to believe that wild animals and plants have inherent worth and to act accordingly. And this is to accept the fact that an action will preserve the natural existence of a wild animal or plant as a reason for doing it, and to accept the fact that an action will harm a wild animal or plant, or will destroy its wildness, as a reason against doing it.

This view presupposes a conception of individual organisms as teleological centers of life. The best defense of this conception is to be found in a very recent article: Harley Cahen, "Against the Moral Considerability of Ecosystems" (*Environmental Ethics* 10/3 (1988), pp. 195-216.). Cahen presents a clear analysis of teleological concepts and explanations in biology and shows how non-conscious organisms can correctly be said to be goal-oriented. Cahen also explains in what sense living things, unlike machines, mountains, and other inanimate objects, have goals of their own.

4. If respecting nature entails accepting the aforementioned reason-for-action propositions, what is the rational justification for accepting them? Whatever it may be, it will also be the justification for regarding all wild living things as having inherent worth and hence the justification for adopting the ultimate moral attitude of respect for nature. Watson says that, according to my view, "...the only way to argue for adopting an ultimate moral attitude is to exhibit what it would mean for moral agents to believe and act on it." This is not my view. I hold that the only way to argue for adopting an ultimate moral attitude is by showing the rational acceptability of a system of nonmoral beliefs about the world (in particular, the system of beliefs I call the biocentric outlook) and then showing the coherence that holds between these beliefs and the ultimate attitude (which entails the incoherence involved in accepting the beliefs and adopting any attitude incompatible with the ultimate one). There is no circularity here, since the justification of the beliefs does not require the taking of the attitude, nor does it assume that the attitude is itself justified.

5. On the matter of rights, in my book I argue against using the language of rights to ground

the duties we have to nonhumans. I try to show why the use of such language tends to be misleading. (Watson quotes one of my arguments for this, from page 247 of my book.) If having moral rights is taken to mean nothing more than having inherent worth, however, then my argument (based on coherence with the biocentric outlook) that all animals and plants have inherent worth is also an argument that all animals and plants have moral rights.

6. It is true that only human moral agents can believe that animals and plants have inherent worth and only such humans can attribute that kind of value to them. But these facts leave open the question: Do animals and plants in truth have inherent worth? If they do, they are deserving of moral consideration by any actual moral agents. Should there come a time when no moral agents exist, animals and plants would not thereby lose their inherent worth. It's just that no one would then recognize such worth and no moral consideration of those who deserve it would be forthcoming. We don't create their worth, we recognize it (if we are in the epistemic position of being able to recognize it). Their worth, it might be said, is a moral fact, the existence of which does not depend on the existence of moral agents. (In this respect inherent worth is to be contrasted with intrinsic value and inherent value.) One might call this a form of moral realism. It has to do with the truth of reason-for-action propositions, not with their justification (the reasons for believing them to be true).

7. A final note. Professor Watson's claim that I have expressed "genocidal hatred for the human race" is a total distortion of my thought. First, the whole thrust of my argument in the book right up to the end is that human ethics (human duties and rights based on the foundation of respect for persons) must be brought into balance with environmental ethics (our duties to wild living things based on the foundation of respect for nature). I never claim that environmental ethics should take priority over human ethics, much less overthrow or replace it. Secondly, the particular passage Watson refers to in my book is a hypothetical assertion made in the context of an imaginary state of affairs in

which the human species has become extinct. The statement reads: "And if we were to take the standpoint of that Life community [now understood as all wild animals and plants, *Homo sapiens* having disappeared] and give voice to its true interest, the ending of the human epoch on Earth would most likely be greeted with a hearty 'Good riddance!'" (page 115). I leave it to the reader to decide whether this hypothetical assertion expresses genocidal hatred for the human race.

# **SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF ETHICS AND ANIMALS**

## **Call for Papers for Pacific Division Meeting (in conjunction with American Philosophical Association) Southern California • March, 1990**

Papers on any topic impacting ethical issues concerning nonhuman animals are welcome. Possible topics include:

- The moral (in)significance of being natural (as opposed to domesticated or genetically engineered).
- Are Animal Liberation Front activities consonant with an animal rights ethic?
- Historical studies of conceptions of the moral standing of animals.

Papers must be double-spaced and be ten to fifteen pages in length. Those interested in submitting papers should make their intention along with an indication of the projected topic known as soon as that is possible. Final papers, or substantive drafts, must be received by September 15, 1989.

Send statements of intent and papers to:

Professor Steve F. Sapontzis  
Department of Philosophy  
California State University  
Hayward, California 94542

Those interested in chairing the session or in being commentators should also contact Prof. Sapontzis by September 15.

(Papers and comments will subsequently be published in **Between the Species**.)